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Guest Perspective: The White House

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College access and completion are at the core of President Obama's North Star goal. This goal was announced by the President in March of 2009 at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, where he stated that by 2020, the United States would once again have the highest proportion of young people with a post-secondary degree. The President made this a goal of his administration because in today's global, knowledge-based economy, every student needs to pursue and complete some form of higher education in order to remain competitive in the workforce, whether that be a two or four year degree, community college, or an industry-recognized professional training program. To support her husband's North Star goal, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Reach Higher Initiative in 2014 to commit to use her platform at the White House to meet that 2020 goal, especially for our most vulnerable students, like first generation college goers.

The First Lady believes that completing post-secondary education is the key to the future for Generation Z (students aged 14-19), and recent studies agree. Completing college is important because by 2020, 65 percent of all U.S. jobs will require postsecondary education/training after high school. Compared to a high school diploma, getting a degree from a two-year school—going to a



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community college and getting an associate's degree—could earn a graduate more than \$300,000 over the course

of their lifetime. And a four-year degree will earn a graduate a million dollars more than if he or she had merely a high school degree.



The First Lady, a first-generation college graduate herself, recognizes the impact higher education had on the trajectory of her life, which is why she has been fighting so hard to ensure that more young people are pursuing and completing a post-secondary degree. She has even become affectionately known within the counseling community as the nation's "school counselor in chief." This has meant focusing on four key areas to ensure that students understand what they need to complete their education: 1) Exposing students to college and career opportunities; 2) Understanding financial aid that can make college affordability a reality; 3) Encouraging academic planning and summer learning opportunities; and 4) Supporting school counselors who can help more students navigate the path to and through college.

One of the main strategies the First Lady has used to further these goals is using the



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convening authority of the White House to produce better outcomes for students. As part of the White House College Opportunity Days of Action on January 16, 2014 and December 4, 2014, the President and First Lady announced over 700 commitments to expand opportunity for more students to enroll and succeed in college from schools, nonprofits, foundations, businesses, and counselors. The hundreds of schools, organizations, and counselors have reported that within two years of making these commitments, they have already helped students access more than \$5 billion in financial aid, enrolled 1 million more students in college, and set 10 million more students on track to complete on time within the decade. These commitments will resonate and expand educational opportunities for years to come.

In addition to public-private partnerships, the First Lady understands the importance of using her platform to change the cultural conversation around education. That is why she launched Better Make Room, a public awareness campaign that targets Generation Z, to encourage students to take charge of their future. This campaign utilizes new media to reach students where they are at, whether that be Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and now, texting. It has also meant creating a viral rap video with Saturday Night Live's Jay Pharaoh or hanging out with YouTube or

Vine influencers to talk about why education matters. And then bringing that to the student level, the First Lady decided to elevate College Signing Day to the national stage as a way to recognize high school seniors making the commitment to go to college. When she first participated, there were a few dozen such events around the country, but thanks to the First Lady and her Reach Higher initiative, in just two years, there were over 1,200 College Signing Day celebrations happening in all fifty states, with celebrities, athletes, actors, musicians, and influencers of all kinds taking to social media to post pictures in their college gear to celebrate students and promote a college-going culture.



This past fall, Better Make Room launched Up Next, a mobile messaging tool that provides students and families across the country with free personalized support in searching for colleges, college applications, federal student aid, and student loan repayment. All students need to do to sign up for this free tool is text "COLLEGE" to 44044. This tool, which was developed based off of research done by University of Virginia professor Ben

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Castleman, aims to provide students with “nudges” to help guide them through the college application and financial aid processes, in addition to supporting students in their post-secondary education pursuits.

The First Lady made supporting school counselors one of the key pillars of Reach Higher because she knows the important role they play in student success. Reach Higher has tried to elevate and support the counseling profession by: bringing the Counselor of the Year ceremony to the White House for a yearly tradition; inviting foundations and thought leaders to improve research, preparation, and technology for counselors; and convening teams of educational leaders from nearly 40 states at national Counseling Summits to implement best practices around college and career-readiness for counselors and school districts.

In the past years we have seen the tremendous work that can happen when we bring together public and private partners from different communities across the country. In just three years Reach Higher has engaged thousands of school counselors, college access advisors, college access organizations, and made over 800 million impressions on social media, and the First Lady has helped ensure that more students understand the importance of filling out the

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), giving students access to over \$180 billion available annually in federal financial aid and millions more in state, institutional, and private scholarships. And as of October 1, 2016, the Administration made the FAFSA application available three months early. Because of these efforts, countless students have been inspired to pursue a higher education that might not have otherwise.

The First Lady believes in the power and promise of every young person in America, and knows that the only way that America can continue to be the bulwark of freedom and opportunity in the world is by investing in our students. A great education makes you lucky, but you should not have to be lucky to get a great education.

If you would like to keep up with Reach Higher and Better Make Room, sign up for our newsletter at bettermakeroom.org. 